

PREACH

the Word

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From the Editor's Pen

Life-related Preaching

In his introductory remarks to his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, Luther listed three qualifications of a good preacher: "First, he should step up; secondly, speak up and say something worthwhile; and thirdly, know when to stop."

What are the criteria for determining whether what we say from the pulpit is "something worthwhile"? Jesus says, "Preach the gospel." Paul says, "Preach the Word." For WELS preachers that is always the *sine qua non*.

But what other criteria are there for saying something worthwhile? On another occasion Luther had some critical things to say about preachers who "torment their hearers." I think people in the pew feel short-changed (if not tormented) when they have trouble relating what they hear to their lives. They want to know more than just what God is saying about his mighty saving acts in history. They want to know what God is saying to them personally. What does this mean for me?

That question probably belongs in second place on a list of criteria for good preaching. Good preaching is always life-related.

During the decade I served at St. John, Wauwatosa, Wis., it was our privilege to have our member, Paul Kelm, serve as a guest preacher two or three times a year. Not only does Paul "preach the Word" powerfully. He also has a special, enviable gift for making sermons life-related. For that reason I invited him to share his thoughts on that subject with us in this issue of *Preach the Word*. I think you will find what he has to say both instructive and challenging. And I thank him for sharing his insights.

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PREACH
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Preach the Word to Real Life

Pastor Paul Kelm

What do critics mean when they say that a sermon is “boring?” Maybe they mean that the delivery lacked excitement, that the pace was slow or the thought repetitive. But as a veteran preacher of boring sermons, I’m convinced most people mean that the sermon didn’t connect with their life. Preachers get defensive at the suggestion that sermons aren’t relevant, so a few disclaimers are in order.

God’s Word IS relevant. It is neither philosophical ideology nor mythological mysticism. God communicated his truth and love to us in real life history and pointed propositions. His Son, the Truth, used everyday life as his illustrations and the hurts and longings of the human heart for his applications. Because truth doesn’t change and human nature hasn’t changed, Scripture is timelessly relevant. But culture changes and idioms change; how people listen and learn changes; the way they think and the assumptions they have change. And so preaching changes.

Preaching is relevant. The mission of Christ’s Church is to expound and apply God’s Word, with law that makes people squirm before it pins them to the mat and with gospel that draws the pain and the poison out of souls, then restores their strength and purpose. (Mixed metaphors like that may be jarring to older preachers but right on for younger listeners.) God hasn’t called us to be mawkish moralists or motivational manipulators. (Alliteration like that may read better than it sounds; and sounding impressive is no substitute for communicating.) He called us to preach

the Word. But visual learners and people with Attention Deficit Disorder get more out of shorter sermons with object lessons, sensory appeal, and highly illustrative language. And a generation that no longer thinks in linear logic and abstract complexity is looking for a few strong images to hang on to and applications so pointed that the fit is tailored. Preaching changes.

Real life-related preaching occurs at different levels. In the introduction of the sermon it may mean grabbing attention with references to news events, community concerns, and themes from the world of entertainment. It may mean painting a situation that nearly everyone has faced or posing a problem with which most people have wrestled. The subtle message is that the guy who’s preaching knows where you’re at, and the Christianity he’s proclaiming can make sense out of the life you’re living. The closer the preacher gets to what the person in the pew is thinking and feeling, the more apt the listener is to get on board and see where this sermon is going.

In exposition, life-relatedness means developing the texture of the text. The people in the narrative or the audience for the epistle have to come alive for the hearer. Contemporary hearers look for the “story.” Engage the listeners’ minds with the cognitive, the theological, and the psychological (the what and the so what). Challenge people with paradox and problem, with the questions for which this “sound-bite” of God’s Word is the answer. But touch their hearts with the affective, soaring joy and choked-up love and bitter hurt.

Worth Quoting?

“In the pride of the flesh, every theologian feels the need to innovate. But if what he says is true, then it’s not new; if it’s new, then it’s probably not true.”

Robert Hochmuth on a postcard he sent to the editor in 1975.



Definition of philosophical preaching: “One man telling what he does not know to another man who does not understand what he is talking about.”

Clarence McCartney,
Preaching Without Notes, p. 56



“The glory of the Lord is a man fully alive.”

Irenaeus



Exposition is more than an outline of doctrinal concepts. The words the Spirit chose have the rich texture of another century's social setting and real people's emotional valuing. Sometimes the words paint pictures, words like redemption and reconciliation. Sometimes an illustration is God's message. Who really needs a preacher to unpack the parable of the prodigal son? Often the task of interpretation is simply transposing, from God's worldview to ours and from one culture to another. Good illustrations do that job today the way they did in biblical times. Good preachers look at their world as a thesaurus of metaphors and object lessons.

In application, real-life preaching gets inside of people. It identifies feelings and attitudes: the good, the bad, and the ugly. Some listeners wonder how the preacher can read minds, little knowing that it's the preacher's mind anonymously displayed. Some listeners marvel that others actually feel the way they do. And brothers and sisters in the faith are drawn closer together by the shared experience of the sermon. Today's audience may work back from feelings to concepts rather than progress logically in application from a truth to an attitude.

In either case, the art of application is fitting into people's lives once more the centrality of God's forgiving love, then drawing out of their hearts the joy, peace, love, courage, hope, certainty, trust and so much more that the gospel produces. Applications should address pointedly the decisions and conflicts and value judgments in "church" people's

lives, not in the damned world. They can explore the tensions in the family and in the workplace, because we are created as relational beings and our Christianity is—at its core—about relationship. They can recreate situations where not only what our Savior invites us to do, but why and how become obvious. The challenge for the preacher, however, is to go at least one step beyond the obvious, one level deeper than the surface. Surprise your hearers with what they never thought about before, but can resonate with now that you mentioned it.

Sociologists have described ours as a post-literate, "oral" society. I suppose that's what television and years of experimental education have done. People buy books; they just don't read them. Commentators, not columnists, shape society's viewpoints. Drama, not debate, captures an audience. That's had a huge impact on a dinosaur preacher like me. I've had to learn how to tell stories, paint pictures, touch hearts. It's been good for me. You see, along the way I've rediscovered the softer side of theology. Oh, I'm still a hard-edged confessional Lutheran; but I think I understand my God better . . . and my brothers and sisters . . . and myself. I've seen facets of truth I used to miss in Scripture, and I've regained some excitement about sharing it. A couple of good books on homiletics have reminded me that Jesus' day was a "pre-literate," oral society. Jesus not only is and teaches the content of good preaching; he is a good mentor for the style of contemporary preaching. It's life-related. And that's never boring.

During the calendar year 1999, there are several minor festivals that fall on Sundays and are not preempted by other major festivals. As you plan your preaching for the new year, you may wish to take note of them. The page numbers reference NPH's *Christian Worship Manual*.

Jan. 24

St. Timothy,
Pastor and Confessor
(p. 452)

Apr. 25

St. Mark, Evangelist
(p. 455)

July 25

St. James, the Elder,
Apostle
(p. 459)

Aug. 15

St. Mary,
Mother of our Lord
(p. 460)

Dec. 26

St. Stephen,
Deacon and Martyr
(p. 465)

"For in [the lives of the saints] one is greatly pleased to find how they sincerely believed God's Word, confessed with their lips, praised it by their living, and honored and confirmed it by their suffering and dying . . ."

What Luther Says,
Vol. 3, p. 1251





Sermon Excerpt—Relating Scripture to Real Life

As an example of life-related content in a sermon, we offer the following excerpts from a sermon preached at Emmanuel, Tempe, Ariz., by Pastor Michael Schultz at the installation of Pastor Snowden Sims. The text for the sermon is the Beatitudes, Matthew 5:1-12. Though the sermon was addressed especially to Sims, much of what Schultz said relates as much to the lives of the members of Emmanuel as it does to their new pastor.

What makes for a gratifying, satisfying ministry? For an answer should we borrow the brief trio of words church planters seem so fond of—location, location, location? You'll have a wonderful ministry here in the Southwest. Sure, it gets hot, but say goodbye to snow and gray skies and bone-chilling cold. Gone are the days of 90 degree heat, 90 percent humidity and 90 pound mosquitoes. You'll have a great ministry out here.

Looking for a gratifying, satisfying ministry? Well, what about the type of ministry you're in? People often browse the call report page on the synod's Web site—and make what kind of comments? "Oh, he would never take that kind of call. I could never see him doing that." The type of ministry you're in makes a big difference, doesn't it? A call to be dean of students versus a call to serve as a synodical administrator, a call to be an associate pastor versus a call to be the only pastor. It all makes a difference about how your ministry goes, doesn't it?

If our old sinful self is talking, things like these will make a huge difference because where we want to be and what we want to do are big ego issues. But when the new self is talking, the part of us that is being

"renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator," then things like where you're serving or what particular type of work you're doing in the Lord's vineyard end up not mattering at all.

These words (the Beatitudes) don't talk about where you are in the country, but about where you are with the Lord. They don't talk about the specific type of ministry you have, but they do sum up the substance of the preaching, teaching and counseling ministry you carry out. When applied to you personally as a husband, father, pastor, when applied to this congregation of which you are now the called shepherd, these words speak about A MINISTRY FILLED WITH BLESSINGS (the sermon theme).

Blessings will fill your ministry, not because of where you are or because of the scope of your call, but because Jesus says they will. "Blessed are . . . Blessed are . . . Blessed are." Nine times. I think he means it. This sermon is addressed to believers. Believers in Jesus have these blessings already. They will have them more abundantly, you and your people will have them more abundantly, as the Holy Spirit molds you, always to a greater degree, into the believers Jesus here describes.

Pastor Sims, from what do you suppose you will derive greater satisfaction—50 people saying, "Great sermon!" after your first Sunday in the pulpit or the realization that you are spiritually bankrupt? Which is more fun, going with a member to an ASU football game or grieving over your sins? Those may not be the fairest, or the most realistic, questions, but they are intended to introduce a point.

The blessings you need the most are the ones that come from the Savior, that Jesus is to the sinner that you are. Part of an installation sermon is that these words first hit home with you personally, just like they need to for me personally, just like they need to for every last one of us personally.

. . . Jesus didn't say, "Blessed are those who've saved the congregation and made all things go well." That after all is his job, isn't it? What Jesus did say is this: "You have no spiritual good to offer to God. You come before God as one who is beggarly poor. But when from day to day you realize your own spiritual poverty, you are blessed as you turn in faith to me because I have every good spiritual thing to give you." All the blessings of the kingdom of heaven—forgiveness, peace, comfort, joy, prayer, heaven. All that for spiritual beggars like you and me! Yes, heaven too! Jesus started with that one, so put it on the top of your list as one of the choicest blessings appropriated by the pastor. "Yours is the kingdom of heaven." That will make your ministry a blessed one.

. . . . With a heart that is grateful for God's forgiveness, and with the strength and abilities God has given you, tell your people that spiritually they don't bring a thing to the table, but that Christ has set out for them the banquet of the kingdom of heaven—forgiveness, peace, joy, heaven and on and on. Pass these blessings on to the people by telling them that sin isn't something you gloat about, it's something you grieve about. But grieving sinners have the comfort of forgiveness in the cross of Christ and the joy of salvation in the fact that his grave is empty. . . .